

Nature's Muse: Exploring Toru Dutt's Garden of Poetry and Sensibility

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Abstract

Toru Dutt, a pioneer of Indian English poetry, is essentially a poet of nature. She possesses a profound sensitivity to the natural world and exhibits the distinctive poetic sensibility that characterizes great poets. Living amidst the simplicity and freshness of nature, her heart responded deeply to its sights and sounds. She was acutely aware of its beauty, and her garden at Baugmaree, with its trees, flowers, and birds, served as a constant source of delight and inspiration for her poetry. Numerous passages of vivid nature description scattered throughout her works bear eloquent testimony to her love of nature. Dutt is highly sensitive to the varied beauty of her surroundings, their changing landscapes, and the enchanting diversity of their moods. Her portrayals of nature emerge from keen observation and profound contemplation. Her poetry deserves recognition for introducing a realistic and authentic depiction of nature, a quality that had long been absent from Indian poetry. This research paper seeks to explore the garden of poetry and sensibility cultivated by Toru Dutt, highlighting the significance of nature in shaping her poetic vision.

Keywords: *Nature; flowers; birds; woodlands; night; stars; landscape*

Introduction

Toru Dutt is regarded as a significant figure in English literature, admired for the timeless appeal of her works. She was a multi-talented writer, excelling as a poet, novelist, and translator. Her brief life and literary journey symbolically represent the experience of many later Indian writers in English, especially in blending Indian and Western literary traditions. Her writings, marked by artistic skill and the freshness of a young perspective, possess enduring literary value. Living during a period of cultural awakening, she emerged as a remarkable literary figure whose influence continues to shine long after her time. She is also especially recognized as a poet of nature, possessing an exceptional poetic sensibility

and a profound responsiveness to the sights and sounds of the natural world. Her Baugmaree garden, with its trees, flowers, and birds, served as a constant source of inspiration. Her letters reveal a remarkable power of observation and an ability to capture even the minutest details of nature:

“The Bheem -raj, a little bird, begins his song; half an hour afterwards, all the bushes and trees burst into melody, the Kokila, the Bowkotha - Kow - which means, 'Speak, O bride', - the Papia & C. And the gay little humming birds, with their brilliant colours, dive into flowers for honey with busy twitters. Oh, it is so cool and pleasant in the morning till ten O' Clock, the warmth increases; from noon to about four in the afternoon, all is quite still, except some lone wood pecker tapping at some far-off- tree. Then in the evening, all the birds are astir again, till it gets dark, when, like wise little creatures that they are, they go to bed.”

Even during her travels abroad, Dutt remained deeply receptive to natural beauty. The landscapes of the Mediterranean and the Côte d'Azur—with their blue seas, bougainvillea, terraced hills, vineyards, and orchards—greatly impressed her. Yet her strongest attachment remained with the Indian landscape, which she viewed with wonder and delight.

Nature, in all its forms, colours, scents, and sounds, profoundly moved her. It provided solace from personal sorrow and offered a refuge from worldly anxieties. Drawn to solitude and the invigorating companionship of the natural world, she found in nature a source of joy, peace, and inspiration. As Amarnath Jha observes, “one is struck with the large space covered by descriptions of nature” in her ballads.

Dutt's poetry reflects her sensitivity to nature's changing moods and appearances. Whether depicting dawn, twilight, moonlit nights, or dense forests, she conveys the beauty and vitality of the natural world with vivid imagery and emotional depth. Nature is not merely a background in her poetry but a living presence that inspires wonder, comfort, and artistic expression.

The numerous descriptions of nature throughout Toru Dutt's poetry testify to her deep appreciation of the natural world and its changing moods. Her poems capture nature at different times of the day, from the freshness of dawn to the mystery of twilight and the serenity of moonlit nights. In *Jogadhya Uma*, the approach of sunrise is depicted through vivid imagery:

Pasture-meadows where the kine,
In knee-deep grass, stood magic bound
And half awake, involved in mist,
That floated in dun coils profound,
Till by the sudden sunbeams kist
Rich rainbow hues broke all around.

The scene presents nature suspended between sleep and wakefulness, with mist-covered meadows transformed into a world of colour and activity by the first rays of the sun.

A distinctive feature of Toru's poetry is her preference for wild woodland scenery. Forests provide the setting for many of her poems and enable her to portray nature in its varied moods. In *Savitri*, she celebrates the beauty of the woods at different times of the day:

Oh, lovely are the woods at dawn,
And lovely in the sultry noon,
But loveliest, when the sun withdrawn.

Twilight particularly fascinates her imagination. As daylight fades, familiar objects are transformed by the softening effects of dusk:

The twilight and a crescent moon
Change all asperities of shape,
And tone all colours softly down,
With a blue veil of silvered crape!

The deepening evening gradually gives way to darkness, where stars glimmer above the forest and the atmosphere becomes mysterious and even ominous:

The solemn darkness haste enjoins,
Not likely is it soon to end.
Hark! Jackals still at distance howl,
The day, long, long, will not appear,
Ho, wild fierce eyes through bushes scowl.

Equally striking are Toru's descriptions of moonlit nights. In the sonnet Baugmaree, moonlight transforms the landscape into a scene of delicate beauty:

But nothing can be lovelier than the ranges
Of bamboos to the eastward, when the moon
Looks through their gaps, and the white lotus changes
Into a cup of silver.

Toru's poetry reveals a marked attraction to the vast, wild, and sublime aspects of nature. Alongside scenes of beauty and tranquility, she explores forests, storms, darkness, and other awe-inspiring elements of the natural world. This affinity extends to trees, which occupy a central place in her poetic imagination. Our Casuarina Tree exemplifies her emotional and symbolic attachment to trees, transforming a childhood memory into a timeless emblem of beauty and affection. 'Our Casuarina Tree' presents a dynamic beauty of the morning scene:

When first my casement is wide open thrown
At dawn, my eyes delighted on it rest;
Sometimes, and most in winter, on its crest
A grey baboon sits statue- like alone
Watching the sunrise; while on lower boughs
His puny offspring leap about and play;
And far and near kokilas hail the day;
And to their pastures wend our sleepy cows;
And in the shadow, on the broad tank cast
By that hoar tree, so beautiful and vast,
The water-lilies spring, like snow enmassed. (Our Casuarina Tree)

Our Casuarina Tree is more than the poetic evocation of a tree; it is rather recapturing the past and immortalizing the moments of time so recaptured. In the words of Dr.K.R.S. Iyengar "The tree is both tree and symbol, and in it is implicated both time and eternity". Many of the trees that appear in Baugmaree recur in Buttoo:

What glorious trees! The sombre saul
On which the eye delights to rest,
The betel-nut, a pillar tall,
With feathery branches for a crest,
The light-leaved tamarind spreading wide,
The pale faint-scented bitter neem,
The seemul, gorgeous as a bride,
With flowers that have the ruby's gleam.

Only someone who had watched the beautiful trees of India for hours and loved them could have written so accurate a description of them. There are frequent descriptions of Indian scenery in her poems that make us realize how deeply she loved India and its natural phenomenon.

Critics have often observed that Toru is primarily a poet of trees rather than flowers. As E. B. Satyam notes, she portrays the trees of the forest with rich detail and precision, whereas flowers receive comparatively little attention. Her poetic imagination is therefore more closely associated with woodland landscapes and the enduring presence of trees than with floral beauty.

Although flowers appear in Toru Dutt's poetry, they are generally mentioned rather than elaborately described. As E.B. Satyam says: 'Toru is essentially a poet of trees and woodland wilds. She is not a poet of flowers. There are few more than a dozen floral references in all her mature poetry; and most of them are vague and general. While she lovingly describes the various trees in the forest in great detail, she passes by the flowers with; just the bare mention'.

References to water lilies, seemuls, sirish flowers, nagessur blossoms, and roses are brief and incidental. The few flowers in Toru's poetry are mentioned by name but are not described in detail; the water-lilies "spring like snow enmassed"; the seemuls have "the ruby's gleam" and are "red, red and startling like a trumpet's sound"; the sirish is "famed in Sanskrit song, which rural maidens love to wear"; the flowers of nagessur hang "like earrings"; the roses are "sweet and full, and large as lotus flowers".

The notable exception is the lotus, which occupies a privileged position in her poetic imagination. In her sonnet *The Lotus*, the flower emerges as the "queen of flowers" and acquires a rich symbolic and cultural significance.

The poem presents a contest between the rose and the lily, resolved through the creation of the lotus, which combines the virtues of both flowers. Critics have debated the origins of this theme. While Amarnath Jha suggested a connection with Tennyson, E. B. Satyam points to the influence of William Cowper's *The Lily and the Rose*. Yet Toru's achievement lies not in imitation but in adaptation. By elevating the lotus above the rose and the lily, she transforms a Western poetic motif into a celebration of an Indian cultural symbol. As C. D. Narasimhaiah observes, Toru's treatment surpasses its possible source in originality, insight, and poetic execution.

Toru's love of nature also extends to animals and birds. Deer, elephants, tigers, monkeys, peacocks, swans, and nightingales frequently appear in her poems, enriching her portrayal of the natural world. These creatures are presented not merely as decorative elements but as integral components of the landscape.

Toru also lovingly introduces the birds like peacocks and swans. The gay little hummingbird that meets us is nightingale, either hailing the day or singing mystic rhymes to assuage the fears and sorrows of the human beings.

The birds of Toru are not the denizens of the sky, but they inhabit the earth. Sometimes the nightingale makes itself invisible in the thick groves of the forest. Toru is "a landscape painter" reveling in the world of variegated foliage. We come across in her natural world many shades of green, from the light green of the tamarind to the dark green tint of the mango. The flowers of rich red and ruby color hanging in immense clusters among the leaves stand in striking contrast to the green plume-like leaves. The poem "Baugmaree" reveals the poet's "keen sensitiveness to nature and specially to colour", where she suggests vividly the gorgeousness of nature's colors:

A sea of foliage girds our garden round,
But not a sea of dull unvaried green,
Sharp contrasts of all colours here are seen;
The light-green graceful tamarinds abound
Amid the mangoe clumps of green profound,
And palms arise, like pillars gray, between;
And o'er the quiet pools the seemuls lean,
Red, -red, and startling like a trumpet's sound.

Toru's deep affection for nature is evident in her many letters, where she passionately describes flowers, birds, gardens, fruits, and trees. These letters frequently mention her garden house and its surroundings, especially the blooming plants, fruit-bearing trees, and birdlife that filled her garden. In one of her letters, she writes: "I wish I could send you a basket of fruits of the season. It would gladden your eyes! Yellow or vermilion mangoes, red leeches, white jumrools, and deep violet jams."

A keen observer of colour and form, Toru creates vivid natural scenes marked by rich contrasts. Her landscapes are dominated by varied shades of green, punctuated by the red and white blossoms that brighten forests and gardens. In poems such as *Baugmaree*, she demonstrates a remarkable sensitivity to colour, presenting nature as a harmonious blend of sound, fragrance, and visual beauty. Through this synthesis, nature becomes an earthly paradise capable of inspiring wonder and delight.

Toru's nature poetry is distinguished by its realism and fidelity to observation. Unlike much earlier Indian English poetry, which often relied on conventional imagery and stock descriptions, her work is rooted in direct experience and personal response. Earlier poets frequently presented nature through rhetorical language and inherited literary conventions, whereas Toru brought freshness, precision, and emotional authenticity to her descriptions.

More importantly, she transformed nature from a mere backdrop into a living presence intimately connected with human emotions and actions. In poems such as *Savitri*, natural settings reflect and reinforce the emotional experiences of the characters. The

awakening of love is accompanied by scenes of beauty and radiance, while moments of sorrow are mirrored by darker and more desolate landscapes. Nature thus becomes an active participant in the poetic narrative, shaping atmosphere and deepening emotional significance.

In Sindhu, nature provides an essential background for the tragic accident in which Dasarath mistakenly kills Sindhu. The tranquil landscape, the deepening evening shadows, and the fading light on the river create an atmosphere of foreboding that anticipates the coming tragedy.

Toru's treatment of nature also reflects her attraction to a simpler and more harmonious way of life. Influenced by the Romantic idealization of the past, she turns to the world of the forest hermitages, where human beings, animals, and nature coexist peacefully. In Savitri, Sindhu, and Buttoo, the forest becomes a sanctuary removed from the artificiality and conflicts of society. The description of Valmiki's hermitage in Buttoo conveys this sense of peace and sanctity:

A dense, dense forest, where no sunbeam pries,
And in its centre a cleared spot. --There bloom
Gigantic flowers on creepers that embrace
Tall trees; there, in a quiet lucid lake
The white swans glide; there, "whirring from the brake",
The peacock springs; there, herds of wild deer race;
There, patches gleam with yellow waving grain;
There, blue smoke from strange altars rises, light,
There dwells in peace the poet-anchorite.

Life in these woodland settings is marked by harmony and fellowship. In Savitri, animals and birds share in the joys of human life. The marriage procession of Savitri becomes a celebration not only for the inhabitants of the hermitage but also for the peacocks, deer, and monkeys that appear as participants in the festive scene.

This ideal relationship between humanity and nature reaches its fullest expression in Buttoo. Rejected by society, Buttoo finds acceptance and peace in the forest. Nature relieves his suffering, restores his self-respect, and offers him emotional healing:

Oh what a scene! How sweet and calm!
It soothed at once his wounded pride,
And on his spirit shed a balm
That all its yearnings purified.

The forest welcomes him and provides him with food, shelter, and companionship. Unlike human society, which excludes him because of caste, nature makes no distinctions. The animals approach him without fear or prejudice, leading him to recognize a bond with them that he cannot find among human beings:

They touch me," he exclaimed with joy,
"They have no pride of caste like men."

Nature also becomes his teacher. Deprived of formal instruction, Buttoo resolves to learn from the living world around him:

I shall learn
From beast, and fish, and bird with wings,
And rock, and stream, and tree, and fern.

Like the exiled Duke in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, he discovers wisdom and guidance in the natural world. Nature even serves as a guide, warning him of impending danger through signs and omens. Thus, in *Buttoo*, nature functions simultaneously as companion, teacher, and moral force.

The poem further contrasts the generosity of nature with the selfishness and injustice of human society. While Dronacharya destroys in a moment what *Buttoo* has achieved through years of effort, nature gives freely and asks for nothing in return. Through his close association with the natural world, *Buttoo* rises above bitterness, resentment, and social prejudice. His final sacrifice becomes understandable only in the light of the values he has learned from nature—selflessness, endurance, and moral greatness.

At its core, *Buttoo* explores the relationship between humanity and nature. The poem presents a vision of fellowship among human beings, animals, and the natural world, while also expressing sympathy for the oppressed and marginalized. Its celebration of forest life, rejection of social barriers, and emphasis on individual worth reflect the influence of Romanticism. Yet these Romantic elements are blended with the Indian ideal of simple living in harmony with nature, creating a unique synthesis of the classical and the romantic.

In *Jogadhya Uma*, Toru Dutt employs nature to create an atmosphere of mystery suitable for the supernatural elements of the poem. The treatment of nature reveals the influence of Romantic poetry, particularly in its emphasis on mood and suggestion. Sunlight functions as the central image throughout the poem. From the rainbow hues of dawn to the broad sunshine at its conclusion, light illuminates the landscape while simultaneously enhancing its mystery. The silent ghat, the radiant appearance of the goddess, and the profound stillness that follows her disappearance all contribute to an atmosphere in which the supernatural appears both natural and believable. Nature itself seems awestruck by the divine presence:

The birds were silent in the wood,
The lotus flowers exhaled a smell
Faint, over all the solitude,
A heron as a sentinel
Stood by the bank. They called,—in vain,
No answer came from hill or fell,
The landscape lay in slumber's chain,
E'en Echo slept within her cell.

The stillness of birds, flowers, and landscape intensifies the sense of mystery and lends credibility to the supernatural event. Through such vivid descriptions, Toru successfully fuses the natural and the mystical.

Nature occupies a central place throughout Toru's poetry and frequently becomes as important as the narrative itself. In poems such as *Sindhu*, natural scenery is woven into the action, creating a unified picture in which forests, animals, rivers, and human activity coexist.

Her descriptions are marked by careful observation, vivid imagery, and emotional sensitivity, qualities that distinguish her from many earlier Indian English poets.

Although Toru shares with Wordsworth a deep love of nature, her response remains primarily emotional rather than philosophical. She rarely speculates on nature's metaphysical significance; instead, she delights in its beauty, tranquility, and restorative power. Solitary landscapes, quiet forests, and peaceful natural scenes particularly attract her imagination, and her descriptions are often characterized by a tone of calmness and solemnity.

Nature in Toru's poetry is also closely linked with human emotions and moral values. Its changing moods reflect the emotional experiences of her characters, while its harmony and simplicity offer an alternative to the artificiality of society. Like the Romantic poets, she presents nature as a source of guidance, inspiration, and moral renewal. Forest hermitages, where humans, animals, and the environment coexist peacefully, embody an ideal mode of existence free from pride, conflict, and social divisions.

Conclusion:

For Toru, nature represents a sacred and harmonious world in which individuals seek self-realization and spiritual fulfilment. Her characters live in close communion with their surroundings, finding in nature not only beauty and consolation but also the values necessary for personal growth and moral perfection. H.A.L. Fisher rightly remembered Toru as the "child of the green valley of the Ganga." She has earned this title through her strong sense of Indianness and her profound love for nature.

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